

It was the considered opinion of John Calvin that the creeds of the church ought to be sung rather than said: that the great theological affirmations of Christianity are best set to liturgy and music, rather than the dry, school-boy weekly recitation that happens in most services of worship. Now, Calvin reasoned and wrote prolifically. He was, and is, one of the intellectual giants of western civilization. In his monumental "Institutes of the Christian Religion", he thought through the perplexing matters of God's Grace, God's love, salvation, and the whole question of what happened on the cross, in detailed and scholarly fashion. And any theologian or preacher who presumes to address himself to these matters today, has not done his homework until he discovers what Calvin had to say about them. But when it came to making a personal statement of faith; when it came to internalizing the scholarly theology as personal witness, Calvin preferred to sing. For, scholar that he was, he still realized that personal faith in Jesus Christ is more a matter of the heart and emotions, than the mind and intellect.

That, in turn, sounds very much like St. Paul - no intellectual slouch himself - when he said that "This doctrine of the cross is sheer folly.... God has made the wisdom of this world (the wisdom of the mind, we might interpret) look foolish."

And so, we think today about Jesus the Savior, about his death on the cross. And even as we begin, I should like to underscore the suggestion of John Calvin, that what we deal with this morning has to do with our deepest feelings and emotions: that it pushes far beyond our ability to think and reason; that it is more appropriately called the music of the heart than the reasons of the mind.

So let us begin. "Jesus saves." - "Jesus died to save us from our sins." We have an obvious and immediate language problem. Those phrases, packed with theological freight and used relentlessly over the years by the Christian

Church have become part of our culture's collection of popular enphemisms. They have - let us admit in all candor - very little personal meaning.

To be saved from sin assumes that we have some sense of sin, that we are bothered by it, want to be rid of it. To be saved from hell assumes that we have some concept of hell, and that we are interested in not going there. Neither assumption is very strong: sin and hell are not very popular anymore. And if they are not, then what is it that Jesus saves us from?

"To save" in our culture, and our time, means to preserve, to make safe, to collect and hoard. We save money in a bank: we save stamps: we collect coins. Thus the graffiti on the subway wall occasionally challenges the church to say what it means by proclaiming: "Jesus saves Green Stamps" or "Jesus saves at Bank of America".

To the Old Testament Jesus - out of whose history and theology the Christian faith was born, salvation meant "Wholeness, health, total well being." It meant to be at one with God and other men and one's self. To say that Jesus is an instrument of salvation: to affirm that he saves, means - In the Biblical idiom, that he releases us, liberates and sets us free. If Jesus is a savior it is because he rescues us from everything that ensares and oppresses us: from everything that restricts us from becoming the men and women God created us to be, namely at one with our God, our neighbor and ourselves.

But how does he save? In what sense does he save? What really happened on the cross?

One thing happened for sure. A good man got killed unjustly and unfairly. We've been talking about the humanity of Jesus, and part of that humanity is the story of his death. When he took his small band of followers to Jerusalem for the Passover week, the opposition to him crystalized. The whispers of retaliation in Galilee became shouts of hatred in the arena of Imperial Rome and the Temple of Jerusalem. He came to the city doing and saying the same kinds of things that he had done for three years: but this time, in five short days, after a monumental amount of scheming and conspiring, a way was devised of

getting rid of him decently and in order. The best the Jews could do was to charge him with blasphemy - but the Romans weren't about to execute a man for a religious crime, particularly in that they had their own problems with the religion of their Jewish subjects. The best they could do was regard him as a minor irritant to the Pax Romana - the peace of Rome. Brutal as Roman justice was, it did not provide for crucifying a man because he disturbed the peace.

What seems to have happened is that the religious leaders were able to convince the political leaders that he was a revolutionary, guilty of treason - and that was a capital offense. The Romans still must have been a little queasy about it because Pilate, in a last ditch, desperation measure, had Jesus whipped and shown publically, as if to say "Isn't this enough?" But the priests had anticipated it and had the crowd now whipped into a blood-thirsty mob. When Pilate brought him out -bleeding and wounded from the particularly effective method of whipping (leather straps with sharp pieces of lead fastened to the end of each) the crowd played its role to the hilt and demanded his crucifixion.

So the deal was made. Pilate washed his hands of the whole mess, and ordered a cordon of soldiers to do the job, which they had to do that day anyway, and so they only had to squeeze him in between two thieves. Thus he died: a slow and painful and humiliatingly public death. The one who had healed and taught love and forgiveness and compassion had nails driven through his hands and feet, and sharp thorns pressed into the flesh of his forehead, and a spear pushed into his side. As he hung there, slowly dying from asphyxiation and shock and loss of blood, he could see that his friends had abandoned him, he could hear the insults hurled at him by the audience which always attended an execution, and he could feel the spittle of other men running down his face. He exposed his complete humanity for them, and us, and all men to see: "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?"

He died, unjustly, unfairly, unusually brutally. He died for the cause of

love and peace and forgiveness. He died because he was honest: he died because he stood for a better way than hatred and revengeance, selfishness. We are, and ought to be, inspired by his example. A prayer of Chinese Christian pleads, "O God give us something to die for: if we have nothing to die for, we have nothing to live for". Jesus of Nazareth had his cause: he lived for it and died for it. And the rightness - the goodness of his cause has been compelling the hearts of men ever since.

To know that much: is to be moved, perhaps. But it is not to be saved. Thus the death of Jesus of Nazareth - has always been overshadowed by the theological assertion that the death was more than martyrdom. The Church sees divine intention in the death of Jesus. The Church dares to assert that the story of the crucifixion is really the story of God doing something in the arena of human history. In the crucifixion of Jesus the man we dare to believe that God's own son was obeying the will of God, revealing the love of God, and that what was then accomplished has radical implications for the life of every man who ever lived. The British theologian J. S. Whale put it this way: "If Jesus is an unambiguously human martyr and no more, the gospels are a monument to a vast illusion, the Gospel is a mistake, and the extinction of the church is only a matter of time". (Christian Doctrine P. 94)

That is the stumbling block. Something happened on the cross that is personally saving because the one who died there was more than a martyr. He was God's own son. Paul saw that it was precisely here that the Gospel is most vulnerable. The Jews expected a mighty warrior, the Greeks, a philosopher. And Christianity offers a cross. We're still stumbling over it! What does it mean beyond the death of Jesus own brother? How does it save us?

All religion is based on the conclusion that something is wrong with the human situation as it is. G.K.Chesterton used to answer the question of why he became a Catholic with the simple statement: "To get rid of my sins." And if you have any feel for history, literature, psychology, art, poetry, you will not take that statement lightly. Something is out of key at the heart

of things. Oedipus and King Lear were tortured by it. Dante, Goethe, Beckett, even John Updike in Couples, tell us that there is something tragically, frustratingly incomplete with life as it is. Man needs to be reconciled to something: saved from something: made to feel at home in the world and with himself.

There are many words for it. The church has used "sin" for so long that it has very little meaning: Sin in our time has come to mean infractions against the going standards of middle class morality. And that isn't it at all. And so we have heard and read a flood of synonyms: 'sickness unto death, alienation, neurosis, psychosis, estrangement.' In his book, The Meaning of Christ, Robert Clyde Johnson comes down hard on guilt and proposes that the only meaningful way to talk about the human predicament today is in terms of the unresolved feelings of guilt that all men seem to be carrying around in their hearts.

But, for me at least, the condition of contemporary man can be best understood in terms of several crises of confidence. I think if there is anything we need saving from it is our loss of confidence in our institutions, in our selves and in our future.

We find ourselves today in a sea of skepticism. People don't seem to believe in the government any more - or the schools - or our economic structures or our courts - or even our churches. Somewhere along the line - and it seems to have happened in the early 1960's - the American public became cynical. Perhaps it was after two Kennedy's and Martin Luther King were assassinated, and the New Frontier was forgotten, and Vietnam became the longest war in our history. Perhaps it was after the deception in S. E. Asia and My Lai and the Pentagon papers. In any case, I believe we have a monumental problem on our hands because a lot of little people - not just the revolutionaries - but a lot of little people seem to be in despair over the viability of our institutions.

At the same time I believe we have lost confidence in ourselves. The

Psychiatrists tell us that our major problem is a rampant feeling of inadequacy. We keep feeling smaller and smaller: more helpless and powerless. And this, in turn, has cut the bottom out of our confidence in the future. With institutions that don't seem to work anymore; with feelings of personal inadequacy, the future appears as just so much time to be put in. I think we need saved from that. And I don't think that is pushing the crucifixion too far. Because Jesus wasn't crucified in a church - he was executed publically - in the world - on a garbage heap as a result of a quasi political conspiracy. He died in the same kind of ambiguous situation we find ourselves in today - and it is here that he offers to set us free.

I am saved from cynicism about myself and my fellow man - by the fact that Jesus died on the cross. Wallace Hamilton said it this way: "Jesus believed in man so much that He bowed his head and died in the calm confidence that men were worth dying for, that they had it in them to be the sons of God. When men were doing their worst, he was betting on their best."

I am saved from skepticism about the future by the fact that Jesus died on the cross: my future, the future of the Church, the future of the world, any future at all. For what happened on Calvary was that God took a categorically obscene event and turned it around so that somehow it comes out meaning love and goodness and salvation. That means that whatever crises life hands out to us; whatever kinds of personal crucifixions we have to endure, God is there to make it come out creatively, redemptively. That happens in our common life. that happened this week when Christian men in our own community had to make a difficult and painful decision about the future, in the trust that God works in every conflict, every decision, everything we do. That happens in personal suffering and grief when we finally sense that God is down in the reality of despair with us, and that he can pick up the broken pieces of our lives so that we come out of it more fully human, more at one with him and others and ourselves than ever before.

Another man said it for me - and I would use his words: "We are called to

live in this faith: that nothing, no experience of trouble or suffering; of defeat or failure, can come to us that with God's help, cannot be redeemed for a purpose. And to live in this confidence can transform every day." (R.E. Goodrich - The Protestant Hour 4/20/69)

That is the end of what I want to say by way of theology. But there is one thing more, the major thing really, the thing without which all discussion of the cross is empty verbiage. It is this: however we wish to discuss the crucifixion - whatever words we chose - the major truth is that it was for us. Jesus Christ died for you and me. And the trouble with that is - that it has to be felt more than understood. We are saved by Jesus Christ - not when we understand all the creedal assertions - but when we begin to feel and experience.

At a Symposium at St. Elizabeth Hospital last week a very sophisticated psychiatrist kept telling 400 well educated people to stop thinking with the head and starting thinking with the gut. Pardon the crudity - but that is precisely the level at which we must perceive the death of Jesus Christ.

And so let us do this now: carefully, openly, honestly. Let me give you a nail. Hold it for a while: think about it: when you are ready - pass it on to the one sitting next to you.

Jesus died for you. His crucifixion is the best thing that ever happened to you. It puts a claim on your life and mine.

Listen to a prayer written by Michel Quoist, French priest under the title "Jesus Bears His Cross"

Lord, here is your Cross
Your Cross! As if it were your cross!
You had no cross and you came to get ours, and all through your life,
and along the way to Calvary, you took upon you, one by one, the sins
of the world.
You have to go forward,
And bend,
And suffer.
The Cross must be carried.

Lord you walk on silently; is it true, then, that there is a time for
speaking and a time for silence?
Is it true that there is a time for struggling and another for the silent
bearing of our sins and the sins of the world?

Lord, I would rather fight the Cross; to bear it is hard. The more I progress, and the more I see the evil in the world, the heavier is the Cross on my shoulders.

Lord, help me to understand that the most generous deed is nothing unless it is also silently redemptive.

And since you want for me this long way of the Cross,

At the dawning of each day, help me to set forth. AMEN